

NOTE

## TASLIMA, BIGOTS AND VOTE

**Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri writes :**

A procession from the Academy of Fine Arts to the Esplanade metro channel (Nandigram mancha) in Kolkata by artists, actors, poets and other intellectuals demanding the release of Taslima Nasreen from her virtual detention incommunicado, in mid-December, was followed by a largely attended meeting at the Mahabodhi Society hall on the evening of January 2, 2008, which raised the same demand as well as the demand for her return to West Bengal. The meeting was presided over by Mahasweta Devi, and was convened by Sankha Ghosh, the poet, Amlan Datta, economist, Aparna Sen, noted film personality, Sujato Bhadra, human rights activist, Dipankar Chakraborti, editor, Meher Engineer, scientist, and other leaders of civil society in the state.

The heavy hand of the executive had fallen on her and she was being coerced into silence because the High Court in Kolkata had in its ruling against censorship of Taslima's novel "Dwikhandita" made it clear that she was breaking no laws. What was left to the state and central governments was blackmail over her visa.

A notable feature of the meeting was the address by Kripa Choubey, writer in Hindi, who gave an account of how writers in Hindi all over the country were protesting against the treatment being meted out to Taslima Nasreen.

Speakers made the point that the way the West Bengal government bundled Taslima out was dictated by communal considerations. From Nandigram to Nandigram, a significant proportion of the victims of the WB government's land grab policy in favour of big investors were Muslim peasants. The intolerable encroachment made by Kolkata police bigwigs into the private life of Rizwanur Rahman, which led to his death, also infuriated the Muslim community. The expulsion of Taslima was a communal manoeuvre to appease the bigots in the community in exchange for their support in garnering Muslim votes.

It was said in the meeting that just as there was the right to pursue the religion of one's choice, democracy also conferred the right to criticise religion. Apart from the government there was criticism in the meeting of the roles of a section of the Muslim clerics, too.

Criticism of the theoretical tenets and concrete practices of any religious community is usually counter-productive if it comes from outside the community. The religious leaders can sway the community to resist the external "enemy." The criticism must arise from within the community. Well-wishers from outside the community would do well to bear this in mind.

The ferocity of the attack on Taslima both from within the minority community and from outside, and the heartlessness of the state and central government's dealing of her case arise not only from religious fundamentalism and its appeasement but from another equally objectionable direction. Male dominated society and communities cannot stomach Taslima's writings against male chauvinism. The reason why she is considered so dangerous a person by the fundamentalists and the governments in Bangladesh is because she, a wronged

woman herself, has exposed the reality of what it is to be a woman in that country. They are afraid of women reading her works and gaining insight and the courage to resist. Similar is the reason why she is being relentlessly hounded by bigots of the minority community as well as powerful people of the majority community-they resent her exposure of their gender exploitation. Taslima richly deserves popular support, not only as a persecuted person, but also on account of the issues at stake. □□□